DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 374 525 EA 026 099

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TITLE In Search of a Theory of Parent Involvement for School Administrators.
PUB DATE Nov 93
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, November 10-12, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Responsibility; *Administrator Role; Elementary Secondary Education; *Family School Relationship; *Parent Participation; Parent Role; Parents; Parent School Relationship; *School Administration

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a theory to guide administrative practice in establishing and maintaining strong, positive school-home collaboration. It calls for the principal to take an active leadership role in developing and implementing a comprehensive parent-involvement program. It is argued that student academic achievement is more apt to improve through school-home collaboration when the school administrator takes the lead in planning and implementing parent-involvement strategies and activities in three major categories--school-home communication, at-home learning, and at-school participation. Examples of activities for each category are briefly described. When implemented in a systematic fashion, these three kinds of activities foster positive home-school collaboration. (LMI)

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IN SEARCH OF A THEORY OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT FOR SCHOOL ADMININISTRATORS

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
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New Orleans, Louisiana
November 10-12, 1993

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This brief paper focuses on theory development in relation to parent involvement. Beginning with Henderson's comprehensive synthesis in 1981 and Epstein's work in the early 1980s, researchers have increasingly documented the many advantages of close collaboration between the school and the home. Parent involvement in children's education is associated with higher academic achievement, more positive student attitudes toward school, and better behavior. Research in Mississippi and throughout the nation indicates that when parents are involved, children do better in school and schools improve (Becher, 1984; Epstein, 1984; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Haynes, Comer & Hamilton-Lee, 1989; Henderson 1981, 1987; Henderson, Marburger, & Odoms, 1986; Snipes-Johnson & Blendinger, 1992; Summers & Blendinger, 1993).

Parent involvement research, however, appears to make minimum impact on teacher practice. Because of the extra time and energy required, teachers in Mississippi and elsewhere are often reluctant to involve parents in their children's schooling. Negative encounters with angry or irresponsible parents and lack of administrator commitment also add to teacher reluctance.

Just as there are teachers reluctant to work closely with parents, there are many parents who resist becoming involved due to time constraints or negative experiences with schooling.

For example, Menacker, Hurwitz, and Weldon (1988) found that parents who were reluctant to work closely with the school had unhappy memories of their own experiences as students.

The reluctance of both teachers and parents to closely collaborate on behalf of children's schooling is unfortunate. The purpose of this paper is to develop a theory to guide administrative practice in establishing and maintaining strong, positive school-home collaboration. The theory calls for the school principal to take an active leadership role in developing and implementing a comprehensive parent involvement program. It is based on more than a decade of research in the area of parent involvement combined with over a quarter of a century of personal experience as a practicing school administrator and teacher.

The Role of Theory

Although research in the area of parent involvement has significantly increased from 1980 to the present, little work has been done in the development of theory to guide administrative practice. The role of theory in administrative practice is important because a theory integrates pieces of information into a whole. It makes sense out of research data by presenting a systematic view of an assumption through summarizing what is known (Kerlinger, 1984).

Theorizing may be defined as *the cognitive process of discovering or manipulating abstract categories and the relationships among those categories* (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p. 167). A research methodology called *grounded theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 1980; Strauss, 1987) suggests that in developing a theory applying to a specific aspect of educational administrative practice, such as parent involvement, attention should be given to sufficiently generalizing from data to yield a meaningful, holistic picture which enables others to use their own experience to grasp the framework conceptualized. Grounded theory advocates believe that for a theory to benefit administrative practice, it should be applicable to a wide range of situations.

Because school administrators, like teachers and parents, view time and energy as scarce resources, any parent involvement theory created for the purpose of guiding practice must be practical and result in positive, tangible outcomes. To be *useful*, an administrative theory needs to have substance--it must do something (e. g., increase student achievement and improve behavior).

Key Parent Involvement Categories

Parent involvement literature suggests that traditional ways parents have been involved in their children's schooling--bake sales, school carnivals, attending school plays, signing and returning progress reports--do not foster the kind of

school-home collaboration needed in the 1990s if student academic achievement and behavior is to improve. Successful school-home collaboration calls for comprehensive parent involvement programs that take into account the diverse needs of the families which the school serves (Blendinger, Butler & Henderson, 1991; Butler, Henderson, Gifford & McWilliams, 1992; Epstein, 1984, 1988; Epstein & Becker, 1982; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Henderson, 1981, 1987; Snipes-Johnson & Blendinger, 1992).

Synthesizing the *how to do it* writings of educators who address practical ways for encouraging school-home collaboration makes it is possible to group parent involvement strategies and activities into categories (or areas). Organizing strategies and activities into categories reduces fragmentation. Three major categories--school-home communication, at-home learning, and at-school participation--appear to comprise the foundation for comprehensive parent involvement. (Blendinger & Jones, 1992; Blendinger, Jones & Verhoek-Miller, 1993; Henderson, Marburger & Odoms, 1986; Jones, 1991; Lightfoot, 1978; Rich, 1987).

The three major parent involvement categories, along with related activities, are as follows:

1. School-home communication--communicating with parents about their children's learning, the school's program, and the importance of the curriculum of the home. Activities include regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences in the fall and the spring; teacher/principal letters and notes regularly sent

home; good news calls from the school informing parents that their child was recognized for something well done; student recognition messages such as happy grams, positive-message postcards, and special occasion cards; home visits by teachers and/or community-liaison aides; and parent handbooks with general information such as school standards, courses of study, grading practices, etc.

2. At-home learning--helping parents to assist in their children's learning at home. Activities include planned home-reading programs designed to encourage children to apply reading skills and read for pleasure; home-math programs designed to increase children's knowledge and skills in mathematics; informational materials which encourage learning sent or mailed home in the form of brochures, bulletins, or learning letters; reading-writing activity calendars indicating learning activities to be done at home; helping parents to understand the purpose of homework assignments and tips on assisting their children; and workshops designed to teach parents how to work with children in areas such as reading, math and science.

3. At-school participation--encouraging parent participation in school activities and events. Activities include involving parents serving on advisory committees or councils; back-to-school night, open houses and other orientation meetings; parent visitation days to acquaint parents with the school's program; coffees, breakfasts, lunches and dinners designed to exchange school improvement ideas with parents; parent participation in special events such as music performances, school plays, art fairs, field days and carnivals; and having parents assist in classrooms or library.

The three aforementioned categories are interdependent and not mutually exclusive. When implemented in a planned, systematic fashion, they foster positive school-home collaboration.

The Thousand Pound Gorilla

Although most teachers support the concept of comprehensive parent involvement, actualizing the concept calls

for the persuasive power of the proverbial thousand pound gorilla. The gorilla story has many versions but all make the same point. One version of the story has a zoologist taking home a thousand pound gorilla from the zoo over the weekend for observation purposes. A friend hearing that the zoologist has a gorilla for a house guest drops by and asks, "What in world do you feed a thousand pound gorilla after you bring him home?" Pointing to the gorilla perched on top of a table eating a bunch of bananas, the zoologist answers, "Anything he wants!" The point of the story is that thousand pound gorillas very persuasively take the lead in setting agendas and priorities.

Because of the extra time and energy required, close school-home collaboration does not easily happen in the natural course of events. Commitment is needed on the part of a school's teaching staff and administration. Unless the principal gives it high priority status and communicates a vision of what *could* and *should be*, parent involvement in children's education may be a much discussed but never actualized subject.

Establishing and maintaining strong, positive school-home collaboration requires the school administrator to take the lead in working with teachers and parents to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate the parent involvement program. Commitment begins with the principal, although superintendent and school board support is also important.

In Search of a Theory

Parents tend not become involved in their children's schooling unless the principal, teachers, and other staff members show through their actions that they want them involved. Principal leadership and comprehensive parent involvement programing which encompasses the categories of school-home communication, at-home learning, and at-school participation is needed if schools are to improve and children are to do better. Understanding and respecting the diversity of parent interests and needs is essential to developing a program that will strengthen the bond between the school and the home.

As stated earlier, the purpose of this brief paper is to integrate research studies, literature and personal administrative and teaching experience into a cohesive whole in search of a theory to guide administrative practice in the area of parent involvement. The following theory is offered as a framework to guide practice and provide direction for future research: *Student academic achievement and behavior is more apt to improve through school-home collaboration when the school administrator takes the lead in planning and implementing parent involvement strategies and activities in three major categories: school-home communication, at-home learning, and at-school participation.*

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